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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [AF](#) [LO](#)
SUBJECT: CHARGE'S MEETING WITH PRIME MINISTER FICO

REF: BRATISLAVA 212; BRATISLAVA 365; BRATISLAVA 353

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Introduction and Summary: Charge met with Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico on August 18 for nearly an hour. Fico had originally asked the Charge to stop by to discuss the case of Aspect Energy, an American firm whose efforts to explore for natural gas in Slovakia have been subject to a series of non-transparent - and quite suspect - machinations by the Ministry of Environment (ref A and previous). Fico, however, turned the meeting into a tour d' horizon, delivering a long monologue on Slovak political, economic, and social issues. In doing so, he repeatedly distanced himself from his ultra-nationalist (and ultra-corrupt) coalition partner Jan Slota, emphasized his own reasonable position on key issues, and made clear that he hoped to visit Washington in mid-November to meet with President Obama. Engaging and friendly throughout, Fico was clearly seeking to convey the impression that he was an open and frank ally of the United States. End Introduction/Summary.

Emerging from the Recession?

¶2. (C) Fico voiced cautious optimism that Slovakia - along with the rest of Europe and the world - might be emerging from the worst of the global recession. He noted that recent economic statistics from France and Germany represented good news, as both are major Slovak markets (particularly for automobiles, Slovakia's biggest export). He said he was also pleased to see that the U.S. economy was showing signs of growth, given the impact it has on the world as a whole. His biggest economic concern at present is the state budget; he said that a number of his cabinet ministers would soon be screaming at him when told of the size and scope of budget cuts they would be required to make for 2010 (and beyond). But, he insisted, draconian cuts would be necessary to return Slovakia's budget deficit to the Maastricht-mandated three percent figure by 2012. He and his finance minister hope to survive 2009 with a six percent budget deficit, then see the deficit percentage shrink to five in 2010, 4.2 in 2011, and return to three by 2012. Fico credited his government's January 1, 2009, adoption of the Euro with lessening the impact of the recession in Slovakia, expressing relief that the Euro had provided much-needed currency stability in a time of global crisis.

The Political Landscape in the Run-Up to 2010

¶3. (C) Fico very clearly and directly affirmed that he does not intend to push for early elections, as many political observers had speculated he might. Instead, he expects to complete his constitutional mandate and hold regular parliamentary elections in June 2010. With his Smer party running well ahead in monthly

polls, he appeared confident that he would win reelection, with the only real question being how other parties would perform and what options might then exist for forming a new government. While expressing his unhappiness with Jan Slota's Slovak National Party (SNS), he said he would not rule out any of the Slovak parties as a potential coalition partner; it would all depend on the electoral and parliamentary math and on which parties were willing to engage in coalition-building compromises with Smer.

14. (C) In this regard, Fico said that ex-Prime Minister and SDKU party leader Mikulas Dzurinda was making a real mistake in publicly ruling out the possibility of participating in a Smer-led coalition. Fico asserted that the best option for Slovakia in 2010 would be a Smer-SDKU coalition, which would provide the stability and strength necessary to continue the country's growth and development. He said he understood that the recent emergence of the quasi-libertarian SAS party (whose platform includes a significant anti-corruption component and which rejects cooperation with any former communists) might have pushed Dzurinda to take this anti-Smer stance, but he nevertheless was disappointed in Dzurinda's approach and hoped that Dzurinda and the SDKU would reconsider.

15. (C) In Fico's estimation, the ideal post-2010 situation would be for SNS and the ethnic-Hungarians (now split into two competing parties - SMK and Most-Hid) to both end up in the opposition. Fico argued that if one were in government (as is now the case with SNS) and the other out, the potential for mischief and conflict was too great. Thus they both needed to be either in government (which was an impossibility, since neither would participate in a coalition with the other), or they both needed to be left out of the government (which was now Fico's preference). Similarly, he argued that both the notorious Vladimir Meciar's HZDS and the Christian Democrats (KDH) should be outside the government together, since neither would cooperate with the other in a governing coalition. Since Fico expects HZDS to remain a parliamentary party (which is contrary to the expectations of many Slovak political

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observers), he reiterated his thesis that the strongest, most stable Slovak government would be a Smer-SDKU left-right coalition.

Slota, SNS, and the Ministry of Environment

16. (C) Returning to the topic of Jan Slota and the SNS, Fico told Charge that he was planning to present the SNS leader with a political ultimatum regarding the Ministry of Environment on August 19. Under the current coalition agreement, the ministry is under the control of SNS and has seen two ministers fired for alleged corruption in the government's first three years. While Fico was unwilling to elaborate on the nature of the ultimatum, he reiterated several times that he did not expect Slota to accept the ultimatum. And, in that case, Fico asserted that he would fire the current Minister of Environment under his authority as PM, replacing him with either a Smer appointee or an independent ("Green-affiliated," he said). (As septel reports, a version of this scenario did - in fact - play out on August 19.)

17. (C) While such a move would violate the terms of the coalition agreement, Fico argued that he had Slota and SNS in such a political bind that there was no way they would (or could) force early elections or even withdraw from the governing coalition. In describing his motivations, Fico was clear that his political calculation was twofold: First, he did not want Smer (or himself) to be further smeared with the fallout from several corruption scandals involving the Ministry of Environment. Second, he said that standing up to Slota was a political-plus with most segments of the electorate. When the Charge subsequently raised both the Aspect Energy and InterBlue (ref B and previous) cases, Fico acknowledged the U.S. equities in each. With regard to Aspect Energy, he offered to have any

new Minister review the situation and, if possible, reconsider the license denials. With regard to InterBlue, he agreed that he would inform us and U.S. law enforcement officials if an American firm were believed to have violated the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act in dealing with Slovak government officials.

Afghanistan and NATO Ministerial

¶8. (C) Fico spoke briefly but positively about Slovakia's military commitment in Afghanistan. He noted that he and his national security ministers (both Defense and Foreign Affairs) have worked hard to increase the Slovak presence there already, and that they hope to deploy an OMLT in 2010 and Special Forces troops in 2011. When Charge reminded Fico that potential U.S. assistance (in the form of training and possibly equipment) for a 2011 Special Forces deployment would require a much firmer political commitment in the near future (i.e., immediately following the Slovak elections), Fico acknowledged that he understood. He also said he looked forward to discussing Afghanistan with Secretary of Defense Gates on the margins of the October 22-23 NATO defense ministerial in Bratislava.

Roma, Extremism, Hungarians, and Anti-Semitism

¶9. (C) Fico next turned to question of Roma and, in particular, the recent activities of the extremist group Slovenska Pospolitost (ref C). Fico was vehement in arguing that Slovakia needed to quash any anti-Roma extremist activities. Citing the murders of Roma in Hungary in recent months, he said he was not going to allow such violence to spread to Slovakia; he applauded Interior Minister Kalinak's decision to increase the police presence in eastern Slovakia's Roma communities and he praised Deputy Prime Minister Caplovic's efforts to improve the economic situation of and educational opportunities for Roma in Slovakia. At the same time, he offered his personal opinion that the current plight of the Roma in Slovakia (and elsewhere in Central Europe) was the result of post-1989 developments. He said that prior to the Velvet Revolution the Roma had been required to work and to send their children to school. Even if they had not been "good workers" they had at least earned a living wage under the old system. Since 1989, however, the Roma - according to Fico - had been allowed to live on the dole and otherwise isolate themselves from Slovak society, thus leading to many of today's social problems (e.g., unemployment, alcoholism and drug abuse, truancy, teen pregnancy). Fico also - echoing comments we've heard Caplovic and Foreign Minister Lajcak - asserted that the "Roma problem" could only be dealt with on a regional level and with EU assistance.

¶10. (C) Fico proudly pointed to his government's efforts to respect Jewish culture and fight anti-Semitism in Slovakia. He reminded the Charge that he (Fico) would be personally hosting ceremonies honoring the memory of both the victims of the

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Holocaust (on September 9, in Bratislava) and those Slovak citizens who sought to protect Slovak Jews from the Nazis (on September 8, in Zvolen). And he said he was looking forward to meeting with several leaders of U.S.-based Jewish organizations who would be coming to Slovakia for the two events (and with whom the Embassy is already in contact). With regard to Hungary, Fico expressed real concern (and the expectation) that a Fidesz-Jobbik coalition government would emerge from the March 2010 Hungarian elections. Such a coalition would be a boon to SNS's prospects in the subsequent Slovak elections, he predicted, and most other Slovak parties - including Smer - would be forced to engage in a certain amount of anti-Hungarian rhetoric, thus contributing to even greater Hungarian-Slovak tensions.

Meeting with President Obama?

¶11. (C) Fico concluded the meeting by reminding the Charge that he hoped to travel to the U.S. in mid-November to attend a Slovak Embassy-hosted gala celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. Fico said he plans to attend a similar event in London just before traveling to Washington; while in the UK he will meet with Prime Minister Brown. He reiterated his hope that he could meet with President Obama ("if only for a few minutes"), but said he knew - based on recent Slovak Embassy-White House contacts - that the President might be traveling in that timeframe. If so, Fico said he still hoped to visit Washington, but would pursue a White House meeting at a later date.

Embassy Comment

¶12. (C) Although it has been difficult to secure meetings with Fico over the past two years, when we do see him he can be a pleasant, engaging interlocutor. He has a politician's knack for guiding the conversation and sharing supposed confidences - in this case his plan to yank the Environment Ministry away from SNS - thus creating an impression of frankness and shared interests. But his calculations are fairly clear: he wants something from us, in the form of a meeting with President Obama. Viewed in that context, much of the conversation represented a set piece that sought to check all the right boxes: expressions of concern for minority rights; a willingness to work with the strongly Atlanticist Dzurinda; support for NATO efforts in Afghanistan, and personal disdain for Slota. Never mind that many of these assertions don't stand up against the facts, not least his drubbing of Slota, whose polarizing nationalist politics Fico has legitimized by welcoming SNS into the governing coalition.

¶13. (C) But we do take Fico at his word when he says he wouldn't rule out future cooperation with any party, including SNS and HZDS. Such flexibility speaks volumes about Fico's priorities.

Just as Fico's newly-found willingness to spend an hour chatting with the American Charge has a very clear goal (a pre-election photo-op with President Obama), so does his openness to govern, yet again, with individuals like Jan Slota and Vladimir Meciar. But, for Fico, it's not about good governance - note that he didn't even try to spin his latest move against SNS to us as anything more than pure politics - it's about power: getting it, using it, keeping it. In the waning days of what had been a very slow summer, the 2010 campaign has begun.

EDDINS